THE HOUSE OF PERIL

BY LOUIS TRACY

The Master Mystery Story of New York Life

Chief Inspector Winter Joins Detective Furneaux in Unravelling the Van Cortland Mystery

JEALOUSY ASSIGNED AS MOTIVE FOR THE CRIME

Capt. Stuart, Brown, the Butler, and Morrison Are Engaged in Helping the Two Sleuths

THE STORY TO DATE.

BROWN, the butler of the Fifth Avenue mansion of Anthony Van Cortland, finds his employer dead and twelve guests unconscious around a table where the thirteen had gathered for a convivial celebration of the Ace Club the night before. A goldfish in a bowl in the room is floating, dead. A strange odor pervades the room.

Capt. Stuart, an army officer, calls for van Cortland to go for a ride in Central Park and discovers the state of affairs. After talking with Morrison, the chauffeur; Roberts, the valet; Marie, the maid, and Brown, Capt. Stuart calls Police Headquarters and in a few minutes a queer-looking little man appears at the mansion and introduces himself as Mr. Furneaux of the detective force. After looking over the ground he orders that Dr. George Bright of East 83d Street be called.

Capt. Stuart, chosen by Furneaux to notify Miss Mary Dixon, his fiancee, of Van Cortland's death, performs the disagreeable task, but is impressed by the fact that she shows no deep grief. Meantime Willie Dixon, Mary's young brother, one of the unconscious group, awakes after Furneaux has emptied the pockets of all the Ace Club members and taken their fingerprints.

Capt. Stuart accompanies Willie Dixon to his home, meets Mary again, but learns nothing of her feelings regarding the death of the man she was to marry. He joins Furneaux and Chief of Detectives Winter at breakfast, where they discuss the case.

CHAPTER IV.

Mr. Furneaux's Deductive Method.

FROM that moment Alec Stuart realized he was moving in a new world, a world in which it behooved him to pick his way with exceeding care. He valued a certain reputation for calm and clear judgment earned while on a Divisional Staff, and he certainly did not want to lose it at the hands of a pair of New York detectives. He abandoned at once any thought of criticising their peculiarities, and had not to wait long before thanking his stars for the decision. Of course, he fully expected Furneaux to manifest surprise at the 'Chief Inspector's statement; not yet did he grasp the complexities of the little man's character. It was almost a point of honor with Furneaux that he should never be surprised at anything.

"Dear me!" was what he said, pouring out another cup of coffee.

"Does that simplify matters?" inquired Winter.

"No. It's the most annoying thing you could have told me."

"Why?"

"Because it introduces the element of suicide, which I have completely discarded."

"Which you had discarded? you mean?"

"Not a bit. I am precise of speech and use the simple phrases beloved of Lincoln and John Bright."

Winter winked brazenly at Stuart, who, having nothing to say, kept quiet. He himself had thought of suicide as a solution of the tragedy, though it was a theory difficult to reconcile with van Cortland's approaching marriage to a delightful girl like Mary Dixon.

"Well, my pocket Videcq, give us your yarn in words of one syllable," said the big man.

"You may smoke now," said Furneaux.

"That's a good start, anyhow," and Winter offered Stuart a well-filled cigar-case.

"By the way," put in the latter, "do you gentlemen really wish to discuss this ugly business in my presence? I am deeply interested, of course, but"—

"We need your help," said Furneaux. "I have employed you already as a cavalry screen, but you don't seem to understand your duties. When you get the hang of this affair you may make up your mind to tell us what you know."

"What I know?" cried Stuart.

Furneaux waved a hand in air as though impatient of these childish interruptions, and Winter said earnestly:

"Captain Stuart, you are spoiling a good cigar by lighting it on one side."

"I give in," smiled Stuart. Carry on!"

"I'm about to make a speech," said Furneaux sententiously, "and I don't want to be interrupted by either crude humor or military ineptitude."

Winter produced a note-book and wrote the word "ineptitude" in large script across a blank page, whereupon Furneaux gazed at the sky through the upper part of an opposite window.

"Anthony van Cortland may or may not have expected to die soon," he continued, "but I am sure he did not think he was destined to pass out last night. His life had been threatened, however. No later than yesterday, if the date be correct, he received a typewritten slip telling him he would not be allowed to marry Mary Dixon, and that if he did not take certain definite steps to break off the engagement he would be removed without further notice. The note alluded to a previous warning, and is couched in broken English, meant to simulate the effort of an uneducated Italian to express himself."

"Can we see the note now?" inquired Winter meekly.

Furneaux, who certainly was an actor of no mean rank, produced a soiled scrap of paper, apparently the lower half of a folio sheet, which had been torn, not cut, and folded twice. He handed it to the Chief with a fine air.

It bore a date, June 15th, and contained some typed lines, which ran:

"You kno alredda you have not to marri la Signorina Dixon. I need not tell you the wy. It is forbid, see. I not tell you again. You stoppa la nozze or you die in twenty-four hour, see. You putta littel wite car in windo tomor morning, 8 ora, an I not kill you tomor. Nex da you say, in jornal no marri Miss Dixon an Mr. Cortland. Bella this. It is alright. Maka big blac X on littel wite carrd."

Winter scanned the message with close attention and passed it to Stuart, who noticed at once that the letters "r" and "y" and the capital "S" were out of alignment on the typewriter. He passed no comment, however, but placed the paper on the table in front of Furneaux, who still seemed to be seeking inspiration in the blue vault of heaven.

Waiting until each of his hearers had scrutinized the threat, he continued:

"Three of last night's party of thirteen admit that van Cortland spoke of this warning having reached him in a typed envelope, bearing the Grand Central postmark of midnight the night before. He scoffed at it, attributing it to the craze among low-class Italians for sending anonymous letters. Indeed, he went so far as to say that some girl in the opera had probably inspired it. It will be easy to find the girl, and this will be done as a mere matter of form. The note was neither written nor composed by an Italian, but by some one adopting that disguise, some one who knew about the girl, probably a trivial bit of half-forgotten folly, and seized on that pretext to threaten van Cortland with death if he married Mary Dixon.

"I spit at the Italian side of this romance. It centres right here, in fashionable Fifth Avenue. The man who committed this murder was in that room last night. It was he who placed a strong dose of chloral hydrate, disguised by Ghyl Rouse or glycerine and rose-water, in the punch, well knowing that the mixture of wines and liquors would hide effectually the unpleasant taste of the chloral, granted even that the tortured palates of a dozen half-drunken fools were capable of detecting it.

"He himself, of course, took a glass of the brew, but contrived to spill it unseen into the bowl which held that wretched goldfish. No respectable chemist, by the way, would supply one-tenth of the quantity needed to dope thirteen men. Then, when the twelve were down and out, he killed van Cortland—poisoned him—by some hypodermic injection. As soon as he could be sure that van Cortland was dead, or at any rate so comatose as to be on the point of death, he raised the blind of the third or most northerly window overlooking Fifth Avenue, opened the window, went out on the balcony and threw the bottle which had held the narcotic right across the road into the shrubbery of Central Park.

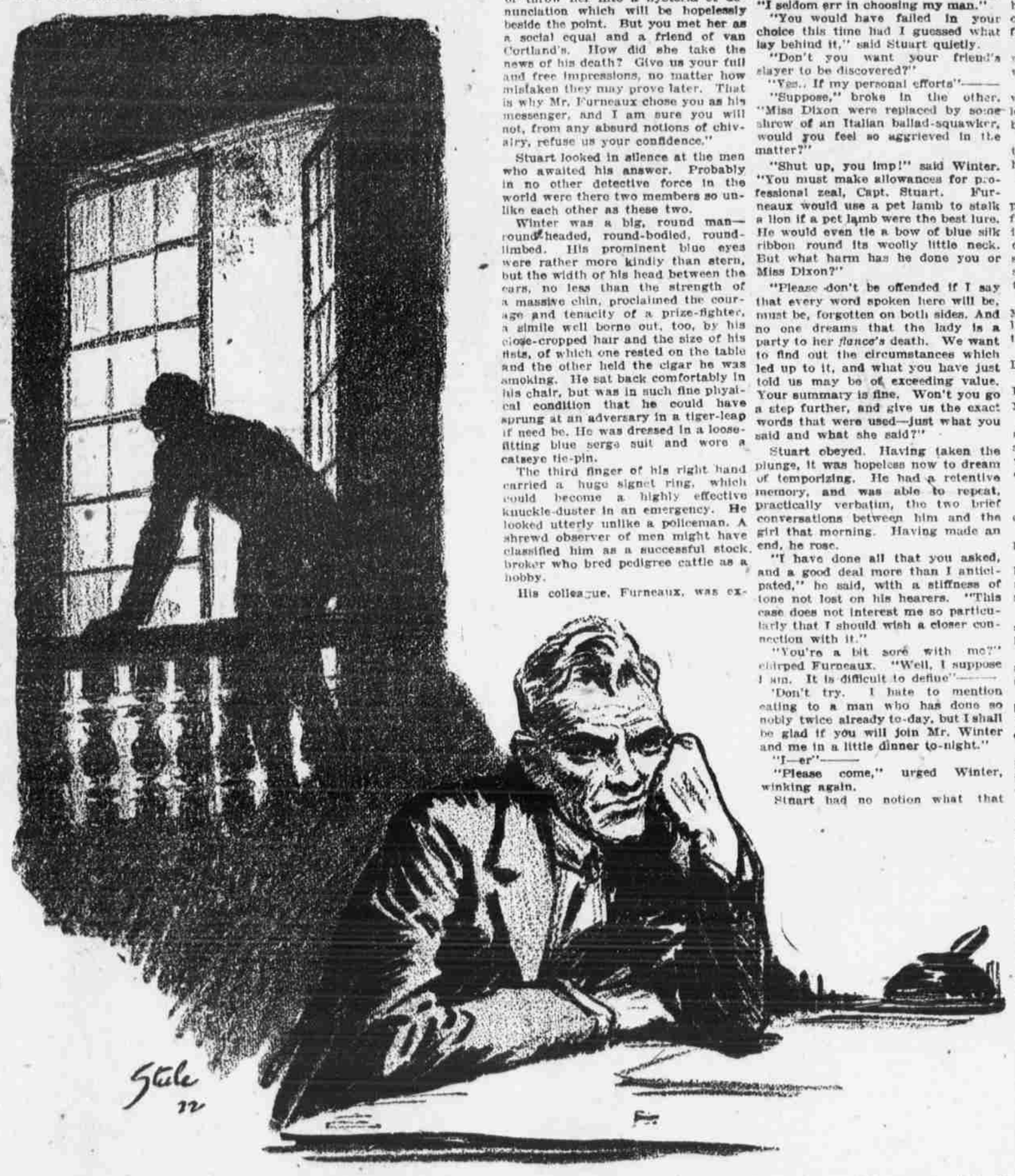
"It probably contained, too, the instrument—I don't think it was a syringe or needle—with which he had administered the active poison to van Cortland, but that has not been found. Practically all the pieces of the broken bottle are accounted for. A man is now going over the ground with a tooth-comb and a magnifying glass for the other thing—let us call it a syringe—but I fear it will not turn up. The murderer closed the window, drew the blind, took a strong dose of the doctored punch and awaited developments, trusting to his own force of will not to betray himself when he awoke, which, he foresaw, would probably be in the presence of the police. And, damn him, he didn't!"

Furneaux's voice broke in a squeak on the last forcible sentence. It was the protest of a genuine artist against unkind fate.

He had relied for guidance on the first disordered utterance of the one man among twelve who knew what sort of deadly peril he was facing when his scattered senses returned, and who knew too that his period of greatest danger would be the few seconds prior to complete consciousness. But the test had failed, or Furneaux said it had.

"The window was neat work, Charles, very neat," said Winter composedly. "How did you get it?"

"Each blind is controlled by a spring at the side of the roller. Brown drew all the blinds at 8 o'clock last night and arranged them properly, of course. The murderer—we'll bracket him Mr. X for short—pulled down that blind too forcibly and the roller shot over the spring. The accident must have disconcerted him more than enough, or, if premeditated, was the finest thing I have ever heard of in the annals of crime, as it pointed straight to the only direct evidence we have, barring the typed letter. The rest was easy—too easy.



"There we have a direct and obvious motive for the crime. Now, it is difficult for us to approach the lady. The mere mention of a detective's name will either seal her lips or throw her into a hysteria of denunciation which will be hopelessly beside the point. But you met her as a social equal and a friend of van Cortland's. How did she take the news of his death? Give us your full and free impressions, no matter how mistaken they may prove later. That is why Mr. Furneaux chose you as his messenger, and I am sure you will not, from any absurd notions of chivalry, refuse us your confidence."

Stuart looked in silence at the men who awaited his answer. Probably in no other detective force in the world were there two members so unlike each other as these two.

Winter was a big, round man—round-headed, round-bodied, round-limbed. His prominent blue eyes were rather more kindly than stern, but the width of his head between the ears, no less than the strength of a massive chin, proclaimed the courage and tenacity of a prize-fighter, a simile well borne out, too, by his close-cropped hair and the size of his fists, of which one rested on the table and the other held the cigar he was smoking. He sat back comfortably in his chair, but was in such fine physical condition that he could have sprung at an adversary in a tiger-leap if need be. He was dressed in a loose-fitting blue serge suit and wore a catseye tie-pin.

The third finger of his right hand carried a huge signet ring, which could become a highly effective knuckle-duster in an emergency. He looked utterly unlike a policeman. A shrewd observer of men might have classified him as a successful stock broker who bred pedigree cattle as a hobby.

His colleague, Furneaux, was exactly half his weight; Stuart had already taken him for a leading jockey or famous comedian. His hands and feet were tiny, even for one who scaled about 120 pounds. It was quite impossible to determine his race from his features. Winter was of pure Anglo-Saxon stock, but Furneaux was named Charles Francois after his French father, and his mother was of mixed New England genealogy. Winter was a fighter, Furneaux an animated thinking machine. The veins of the one held red blood, of the other quicksilver. Individually they were a terror to evil-doers; when they ran together on a criminal trail, as they almost invariably did, there was no social wolf in the United States but endeavored to gallop fast and far to cover at the first hint of the chase.

Glancing from Winter's blandly agreeable face to Furneaux's intent one, Stuart could not help smiling.

"Let us in on the joke," said Furneaux tartly.

"It is no joke, gentlemen," said the soldier. "I have read of a bird being fascinated by a snake, and I was just wondering how the wretched fowl would make out if it were stalked by two snakes."

"I've been called all sorts of things in my previous life, but never a snake," said Winter.

"I was thinking mainly of the bird's predicament. * * * Well, I see no way of escape. I must warn you that I am a mighty poor judge of the feminine temperament, but I came to the conclusion this morning that Miss Dixon was less appalled by van Cortland's death than terrified as to its outcome. She dreaded rather what I might say next than what I had said already. I mean that while overwhelmed by my news, as any decent-minded woman must be, her thought leaped at once to its possible consequences. She assumed he had been killed, not that he might have been the victim of an accident or suspected disease."

Furneaux's face wrinkled in an appreciative grin.

"Mum! Ha! Excellent!" he cried. "I seldom err in choosing my man."

"You would have failed in your choice this time had I guessed what lay behind it," said Stuart quietly.

"Don't you want your friend's slayer to be discovered?"

"Yes. If my personal efforts"——

"Suppose," broke in the other, "Miss Dixon were replaced by some shrew of an Italian ballad-squawker, would you feel so aggrieved in the matter?"

"Shut up, you imp!" said Winter. "You must make allowances for professional zeal, Capt. Stuart. Furneaux would use a pet lamb to stalk a lion if a pet lamb were the best lure. He would even tie a bow of blue silk ribbon round its woolly little neck. But what harm has he done you or Miss Dixon?"

"Please don't be offended if I say that every word spoken here will be, must be, forgotten on both sides. And no one dreams that the lady is a party to her *fiance's* death. We want to find out the circumstances which led up to it, and what you have just told us may be of exceeding value. Your summary is fine. Won't you go a step further, and give us the exact words that were used—just what you said and what she said?"

Stuart obeyed. Having taken the plunge, it was hopeless now to dream of temporizing. He had a retentive memory, and was able to repeat, practically verbatim, the two brief conversations between him and the girl that morning. Having made an end, he rose.

"I have done all that you asked, and a good deal more than I anticipated," he said, with a stiffness of tone not lost on his hearers. "This case does not interest me so particularly that I should wish a closer connection with it."

"You're a bit sore with me?" chirped Furneaux. "Well, I suppose I am. It is difficult to define"——

"Don't try. I hate to mention eating to a man who has done so nobly twice already to-day, but I shall be glad if you will join Mr. Winter and me in a little dinner to-night."

"I—er"——

"Please come," urged Winter, winking again.

Stuart had no notion what that portentous wink meant, but he changed an imminent refusal into a hesitating acceptance.

"Good," cried the Chief heartily. "As there is an Italian flavor in this affair, suppose you meet us at the Restorato Milano, in West 46th Street, at 7.30. Don't wait at the door. Walk upstairs, turn the handle of the first room on the left, and if we are not there, and any son of a gun asks your business, say 'Serpe.' That'll stop his mouth."

"But 'serpe' is the Italian for 'snake.'"

"Exactly."

Stuart could not help laughing, even in that house of gloom.

"I believe you two could persuade me to keep a suspicious eye on my own mother," he said.

When he had gone, Winter rubbed his hands.

"A find!" he said cheerfully. "He may kick like a steer, but we can surely get him to pump that girl."

Furneaux shook his head.

"You're wrong, James. We may want to use him in other ways—hence the dinner. But he's onto our game now, and the girl is off the map where his help is concerned. However, he did us a good turn, an' mebbe we've done him one."

Winter's eyebrows curved in two perfect arches.

"Match-making again, Charles? Such haste is quite indecent," he said. "Poor van Cortland is hardly dead yet."

"She never cared a straw about van Cortland. She almost hated him when it came to marriage."

"How do you know?"

"Because, James, that streak of femininity in me which you think you have discovered assures me, if it exists, that no woman who loved a man would behave as Mary Dixon did two hours ago, and a woman not in love loathes the very thought of matrimony. Next?"

"Have you any sort of plan founded on your analysis up to the moment?"

"No. I must think things out. I need to know a heap more about three men whose rooms I am now going to search. The three are Robert Kerningham, whose handkerchief wiped the vase, Philip Durrane and Francis O. Baker."

"Why Durrane and Baker?"

"Because they, like Kerningham, have long thin feet. Mr. X., when on the balcony, forgot to shuffle his feet lengthwise as well as sideways."

"Luckily for us, Charles, they always do forget something. Do you want me?"

"Of course. How am I to force my way into three uptown mansions unless I have your inert and obese mass behind me?"

It was a sore point with Furneaux that the public would never believe he was a detective.

"Do we go now?"

"I am waiting for the doctor's report. He and an expert in toxicology from the Roosevelt Hospital are making a thorough external examination of the body. It may help some. I suppose the post mortem is the only sure test, but we cannot delay operations for that."

"We must watch our steps. These young asses belong to the best families in New York. They are all in the Social Register."

"One is even an F. F. V., because Durrane hails from Virginia."

"And the girl is in the Junior League. Charles, you must restrain yourself."

"Oh, it is a pretty case, and no mistake. I've known Chief Commissioners lose their scalps for affairs which were not Point One per cent. of this in public interest."

"Ah!" sighed Winter.

"Yes, I had to drag you in. I couldn't pull the weight unaided."

"You little devil! Even over the phone I felt your fine Italian hand."

"Don't mix your metaphors, Chief. It sounds bad at this hour of the morning. And cut out the Italian stuff. There's nothing in it."

"I don't agree with you. You're sharp, I admit, but your survey is limited to the area of a flashlight."

"'Shrp?' 'Flashlight?' If you said my intellect was 'clear' or 'piercing' I might let the insult pass."

"You'll make a fortune out of boobs by your cheap wit when you take your pension and set up a private detective office."

"I'll find you a strong-arm job as bouncer. By the way, the butler here is in your line. Let's put him through it."

Furneaux leaped to the bell. Any one hearing these two bandying unpleasant personalities would have believed that the city detective force was about to lose the services of one if not both of its best men, whereas, as the Chief Commissioner well knew, the cleverest crook in New York ought to tremble when the Big 'Un and the Little 'Un of the bureau were not only yelping at his heels but snapping at each other.

In crossing the room Furneaux happened to glance into the street, so, when Brown came, his first query was:

"Who cleared the mob away from the door?"

"A rough looking fellow who spoke to Captain Stuart, sir."

"How do you know?"

"The chauffeur told me, sir."

Winter and Furneaux exchanged a look of inquiry. Even their omniscience could not solve that puzzle. Then the Chief took up the examination.

"I hear you were in the London police, Brown," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"Why did you quit?"

The butler's face flushed slightly.

"Do you really want to know?" he asked.

"Sure."

"Well, I was getting on all right for five years when a Sergeant stuck his knife into me."

"Stabbed you?"

Brown smiled gently.

"No, sir. That's just a manner of speaking. I couldn't do right with that fellow. He made my life a misery, so when the war broke out I resigned and joined the Guards.

"Good egg! That Sergeant must have been a mean cuss.

"He was just conceited, sir. But I got square with him."

"Indeed, how?"

"In the interval, when I was out of the force, an' before I passed the doctor, I went to the pub—the saloon, sir—where I knew he might be found occasionally when off duty. I ragged him a bit, an' got him to put his hands up."

"And then?"

"I gave him one or two."

"Soaked him in the jaw!"

"Yes, sir."

"Excellent. And how about the army?"

"I got a machine-gun here," and Brown tapped his left shoulder, "three times during the attack on Loos. They invalided me out and I came to America with one of our Embassy gentlemen. That's how I took to buttering."

"No butler in New York has a better record. By the way, what sort was your sergeant?"

"About your size, sir."

"What! Do you think you could soak me in the jaw?"

"I'd try to, sir, if you were to put on me week in an' week out, for months."

"Ha!" cackled Furneaux. "Perhaps, when this affair has blown over and before the house is closed, I can persuade Mr. Winter to come here some quiet afternoon and give you the once over."

The chief endeavoured to look stern, but there could be no doubt that the two big men were estimating each other with a measuring eye.

"My left shoulder still troubles me a lot," said Brown in an explanatory way, and the two detectives smiled.

"Did they blow your hair off in France, too?" inquired Furneaux.

"No, sir. I am proud of my bald head. Hair seldom goes with brains. Look at women!"

Now it was Winter's turn to chortle, for his tiny subordinate owned a shock of black hair.

"Well, let's see how far your brains go," snapped Furneaux, who never expected such a retort from this bland person. "How did Mr. van Cortland meet his death?"

"I think he was stabbed sir, or maybe that is not the right word. Some one shoved a poisoned needle twice into his neck over the jugular vein."

"Ah, you saw that, did you?"

"I noticed the two little wounds when I lifted his head."

"Just as a mere guess—who did it?"

"Some one who didn't want him to marry Miss Dixon, sir."

"Why do you say that?"

"Miss Dixon and her father came here this day week, and there was a serious talk, in this very room. Mr. van Cortland opened the door for them as they went out, and I couldn't help hearing what he said. It was: 'I'm inclined to laugh at the whole business, Mary. You and I will get married if I have to borrow a suit of armor and clank my way to the church through a hedge of stilettos.' Those were his very words, sir."

"Did you see Miss Dixon just then?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did she look? What effect had Mr. van Cortland's assurance on her?"

"She looked worried, sir."

No one spoke thereafter during some seconds. Footsteps were heard in the corridor without, and Winter nodded to Brown.

"Thanks," he said. "We'll have another chat later. Here come the doctors. Tell them we are in this room."

For a brief while he and Furneaux were alone.

"Ca marche!" murmured the little man.

"It gallops!" replied the big one.

(To-morrow another staggering complication arises.)

FURNEAUX THEORIZES: "AS SOON AS HE COULD BE SURE VAN CORTLAND WAS DEAD, HE OPENED THE WINDOW, WENT OUT ON THE BALCONY, AND THREW THE BOTTLE WHICH HAD HELD THE NARCOTIC RIGHT ACROSS THE ROAD INTO THE SHRUBBERY OF CENTRAL PARK."